Objectives of Victim Assistance

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Objectives of victim assistance: the professionalization of service providing organizations. A comparison between European experiences and recent developments in South Africa

1. Background and objectives

It is well known that up until the seventies the victim was the forgotten person in the criminal justice system. His role was limited to reporting the crime to the police and in the few cases where the investigation was successful later to testify as a witness in court. Nowadays, much of that has changed quite a bit. The victim has been emancipated. He has been awarded rights of his own in the criminal justice system and in many countries national networks of local and regional victim support schemes have been established. These rights and services constitute, in my view, complementary measures. This explains why they originated in more or less the same background. One of the most powerful advocates of change in this area has been the womens liberation movement. Their complaints about the horrible aftermath of sexual crimes and the ordeal this meant to the victims have been definitely instrumental in raising the public awareness of the problems also connected with other types of crime. A second important contributing factor in some countries were terrorist attacks involving large scale kidnappings.[1] The aftercare provided for the victims of these acts made it clear to a larger part of the population that other crime victims have to cope with similar effects and are also in need of assistance. And thirdly I raise a point that is often overlooked when explaining the origins of victim emancipation. With the

[1] **Notorious examples of this occurred in Scotland, France, Germany and The Netherlands.**

increasing crime rates in the seventies and eighties, many more people personally experienced what it means to be a crime victim and then to be confronted with a criminal justice system which quite often is at best aloof or disinterested instead of being helpful and sympathetic. Among the 'new' clients of the system there was a rising number of victims who were themselves professionally involved in it as police officers, prosecutors or judges. And this has made quite a difference. Just like the reform of some West-European prison systems was greatly enhanced after the second world war - when so many respectable citizens had had first hand experience of incarceration under the German occupation - the direct confrontation with various injustices when dealing with the effects of crime made many of these professionals much more sympathetic to reform on behalf of victims' rights.

In this article I will focus on the consequent creation of national organizations setting up local or regional victim support schemes. Assuming there is some general need for such services - the precise nature of which can be determined later on - the first question to ask then is what objectives are to be attained by such movements. In my opinion, international experience[2] indicates that three types of goals are preponderant:

a. The overall objective is to assist the victim in coping with the effects of the crime. An important part in attaining this can be to supply emotional support. The process of coping with a traumatizing event has been described many times, so I will not here repeat the various stages it encompasses. The thing that matters here, though, is that victim support could never aim at restoring the situation as it was before the crime occurred. The incident must be integrated in the regular life's experiences of the victim; it can never be forgotten or eradicated, but it should cease to be overexposed in the mind of the victim.

b. A second part of victim support is to provide practical services if and

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[2] **The topic of setting up victim support organizations is dealt with extensively in the Draft International Victim Assistance Handbook on the use and application of the United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, E/CN.15/1997/CRP.11, with a long list of references annexed ti it.**

when need arises. Standard examples of this is fixing the lock of a house that was burglarized in the middle of the night; picking up the children of a mother who is hospitalised as a result of crime; filling out all kinds of forms and questionnaires; etc.

c. A third and very basic goal of victim support is to supply information. Victims will be overwhelmed by all the agencies and authorities they will get in touch with after the incident. This varies from all the actors within the criminal justice system to insurance companies, the medical professions, lawyers, social workers, welfare agencies, to name but a few. Victim support is there to explain the do's and don'ts in relation to all these counterparts. It is there to point out the peculiarities, the opportunities and the limitations when dealing with all the above mentioned actors.

From a slightly different angle - and on a slightly higher level of abstraction - one can say that these three types of goals can be rephrased as instruments to strife for corresponding objectives:

1. **to limit the negative consequences of the crime as much as is possible (i.e.: damage control);**
2. **to avoid the infliction of additional harm on top of the damage caused by the crime (= avoiding secondary victimization);**
3. **to try to get redress for as much as the damage that has been inflicted, by assisting the victim in acquiring financial restitution from the offender and/or compensation from the government.**

2. Victim support organisations in early stages of development

Once there is widespread acceptance of the need to set up a victim support organization, the question is how to do so. In most countries, any such organization started as a grass roots movement. It was not planned by the government, it wasn't part of any official criminal justice policy, it just started because some concerned citizens took the initiative. It is my impression that, comparatively speaking, government involvement and support in the Victim Empowerment Program in South Africa is stronger than it used to

be in early stages of development in Europe. This readiness to show commitment is clearly an advantage in terms of predictable obstacles in the future.

Hence the first prerequisite for getting such an enterprise off the ground is the need for effective pioneers. In order to have any chance of success, the individuals taking the initiative will have to be well qualified. They must have extensive knowledge of and experience with the typical problems victims of crime tend to encounter. They have to be extremely dedicated and committed to the cause of establishing something new, because in the early stages they will meet with a lot of resistance and lack of cooperation by others who feel threatened by them. In a way they almost have to possess a singleminded sense of determination, because the prospects of having a successful career in the conventional sense of the word are very slim indeed. And finally, they have to be leaders. They will have to be able to convince others of their cause, they need the capacity to build a team of like-minded advocates around them, and they will have to be able to educate their associates about opportunities to exploit and pitfalls to avoid. Even so, in setting up effective local and regional schemes it is not enough to have some qualified and enthusiastic pioneers. From the outset, all schemes should be governed or supervised by committees comprising - among others - representatives from the agencies which operate in the larger environment where the victim will find himself to be in. So, it is imperative to include members with a police background and prosecutors. Other attractive candidates can be drawn from the probation service, social workers, and the medical profession.

The second step would be to clearly define the scope of the planned operations, inter alia, to avoid duplication of already existing services. Victim support could never effectively come into being when some other government or voluntary organization could credibly argue that they were more or less providing the same type of services. Fortunately - or: unfortunately, depending on one's perspective - this type of competition was nowhere to be found. In order to get this point across in the minds of policy makers,

however, one must emphasize the unique properties of the situation a victim will be confronted with after the crime has occurred. One must start by outlining the fact that a crime usually has a far greater impact than ordinary people are aware of. Next, it has to be explained that victims of crime are no patients of any sort. There is nothing wrong with them, they just show normal reactions to an intrinsically very abnormal incident. Thirdly, victims do not tend to ask for assistance. All of this sets their situation very much apart from any other group of 'clients' within society so that it can hardly be expected there being an agency or NGO available which is adequately equipped to deal with their problems. As far as avoiding duplication of existing facilities is concerned, it is also important to clearly define the scope of activities the victim support organization is aiming for. In the introduction, I have outlined the basic objectives. But these still leave ample room for discussion on the precise nature - and limits - of the operation under consideration. One of the most crucial decisions to make here is whether or not the organization will also aim at direct financial support for crime victims. In most countries the founders of service providing organizations have decided against that, both for practical and philosophical reasons. Some countries, most notably Germany where the White Rank is very active, have taken a different approach in this respect - with various degrees of success.

The pioneers, and their associates of the first hour, are indispensable to get the movement started. But they will not get very far - and here I reach the third essential condition to be met - if they are not able to get the support of at least one powerful ally within the so-called establishment. In order to succeed, it is absolutely necessary to attract the support of a partner with major influence in politics or in government decision-making. The reason for this is that quite early on victim support initiatives need resources to be viable and have an opportunity to expand. One simply needs a budget to get things done and any such budget will only be made available if the right people are willing to consistently endorse the new initiative and defend it to their colleagues against competing interests. A point to note here is that in

many countries there has been a volatile debate as to what extent victim support should be a financial responsibility of the national government rather than of local municipalities. At least as important is the question whether this area should primarily be addressed by the Justice Department or by the Department of Public Health. Experience has shown that it has been easier for victim support organizations to flourish in countries where it is considered to be an issue of criminal justice than in jurisdictions where it was made to compete with other agencies promoting public health. In South Africa, primary responsibility for the Victim Empowerment Program rests with the Department of Welfare. Against the background of foreign experience, this appears not to be a logical choice. However, possible drawbacks of this approach can be minimized when in the execution of this arrangement optimum attention is payed to the delicate interplay between the various Departments involved. Among others, it will be indispensable to permanently take into account the institutional interests of the agencies operating the criminal justice system.

The next, the fourth, critical factor concerns the decision to operate victim support schemes with a paid coordinator who runs a staff of volunteer visitors. Most countries in Northern Europe have opted for this model. Whenever this occurs, several ground rules will have to be observed. Most important is that the rationale behind this format is clearly explained to the authorities and to the public at large. It should be made clear that this is not a solution forced by necessity because of a lack of funds. The basic affirmative philosophical arguments for this model must be put forward forcefully. In summary, the focal reason for this option is that it conforms most closely to the essence of victimization. Victimization shatters the world-view of the victim. The crime has proved that he could not rely on his fellow citizens the way be expected he could. This shake-up causes fear and anxiety, because if he apparently miscalculated once, what guaranty could there be that he won't make similar mistakes again. Visits by and conversations with volunteers can then effectively contribute in restoring faith in society. The volunteers can point out the normality of the victims reaction to the

traumatic event and can reassure the victim in his beliefs on the pattern of predictability of human behavior. The credibility of his account is enhanced by the fact that the volunteer is just a fellow citizen, showing care and understanding and making an effort to improve things, instead of being a paid professional whose job it is to tell a comforting story. Many victim support organizations are convinced that this is a very powerful and compelling argument to structure their operations around volunteers who go out to visit victims. Of course this can only work as planned when the volunteers are carefully selected and trained. Consequently, it is necessary to early on draw up a list of qualifications every applicant for such a position must possess (examples are: the ability to listen, having an open mind, patience, ability to recognise problems beyond the competence of volunteers, etc.). Once selected, adequate training must be provided. To that end, many national organizations have set up standardized training manuals dealing with the most frequently encountered problems of an emotional, medical, social or legal nature. Follow up training will be provided at regular intervals and the coordinator of the scheme is responsible for debriefing and coaching when ever the need arises.

After the whole process is set in motion and the scheme actually performs its operational functions, a fifth criterion becomes acutely important: establishing credibility. Credibility can only be attained by providing good services to a relevantly large number of victims. The qualitative standards to be met will be discussed below. As far as the number of victims to get in touch with is concerned, it is imperative to design suitable referral procedures. The first - and quite often the only - agency crime victims come into contact with is the police. For solid reasons, the police is often referred to as "the gate keepers of the system". Hence it is of crucial importance to develop a good working relationship between the police and the local victim support scheme which assures that all victims with a need for help will either instantly or at a later stage be brought in contact with the scheme. A major problem in this respect is that at the time of reporting the crime it is often not yet clear whether or not the victim needs any special care. For that reason,

many countries have adopted some sort of system of automatic referrals, based on the principle of negative consent. This means that the police officer taking down the report asks the victim if he has any objection to his name being passed on to the victim support scheme. If not, the representative of the scheme can then within 48 hours contact the victim, explain the nature of the support scheme, and offer their services. The victim has a free choice to accept the assistance offered, and when he feels there is no need for it he will be left the telephone number of the scheme just in case he would reconsider later on.

Another important choice to be made at the outset is about the best way to gradually expand the target group of the organization. Here there are basically two options available. The first one I would call the British model. In England the victim support schemes in their first stages focused on victims of property crime, with a special emphasis on burglaries. The volunteer visitors were very well trained to know all details of the problems these victims had to cope with. The organization was strongly aware of the fact that victims of other types of crime - for instance serious sexual assault - might have to face hardships which require a slightly yet decisively different approach. Hence they expanded their range of activities step by step, and each new area was carefully prepared for by pilots in some parts of the country. In the end the British covered all types of crime, including special care for bereaved families of murder victims. The other model that could be opted for, was - among others - practised by the Dutch. In The Netherlands the victim support schemes started by getting in touch with victims of the most serious crimes, and only later extended the range of activities to the less serious but more frequently occurring crimes. So in this model violent and sexual crime, where the problems of victims are as obvious as they are profound, initially got more attention than property crime. In my opinion, both models are legitimate and quite arguable. It may well depend on national and cultural peculiarities, including the question of political expediency, which one is to be preferred. As I see it, this state of affairs was clearly vindicated by South African experience in the past couple of years.

The seventh point to make is that victims' advocates should from the earliest days exude the message that they are for victims all the way but by no means anti-offenders. The well known phrase to underscore this point is that it is not a zero-sum-game. What is true for victims' rights in the criminal justice system is just as valid in the area of victim support. A major practical inference from this perspective is that victim support organizations should never try to attract funds at the expense of for instance the probation service. They should even avoid comparing the budgets of the two and never use the huge differences between them as an argument to increase the resources for victim support. Nor should victim support organizations participate in campaigns for stiffer sentencing policies. All of this would in the end be counterproductive. It would raise the level of antagonism, it would lead to bitterness, and in the end it would most certainly be detrimental to the weakest or at least the most vulnerable party involved: the victim. So you better join forces - with each side clearly defining its own interests to pursue - than to wage war on an outside enemy with both sides ending up as losers.

In the preceding paragraphs I have listed some vital considerations in setting up a grass roots victim support organization on a national level. Many countries in western Europe have succeeded in doing so, more often than not more or less along the lines described above. It has to be admitted, though, that sometimes this just doesn't work. There are countries where the essential conditions have not been met, with the result that either nothing of any substance was developed or a promising organization effectively collapsed after some time because it was not able to sustain the effort. In cases like that the principle that victim support is basically a grass roots movement must be abandoned. The principle is important, but we should not consider it to be sacrosanct. Instead of having no capable victim support system at all, it should then be preferred to have a government-run-operation. Experience has shown that the government might for instance proceed by establishing special victim support units in police stations. It is exactly this approach which is prominently visible in the South African Victim Empowerment Program.

3. More advanced stages of development: professionalization

Let us assume that a country has succeeded in bringing about a victim support organization operating a nationwide network of affiliated schemes, thereby reaching a relevantly high number of victims. The question then arises as to how to advance in the next number of years and in what directions. Based on the past performance by member organizations of the European Forum for Victim Services, some indications can be chronicled of perspectives to be observed in the process of further professionalization. In all of this it is useful to make a distinction between the external relations of the organization on the one hand and its internal affairs on the other. These will be analyzed separately.

3.1. External relations

As far as external relations are concerned it is of eminent importance to gain recognition for the organization as the dominant force in the field. The government - in all its different layers and segments - and the public at large must clearly identify and acknowledge the national victim support organization as the principal interlocutor wherever victims' issues arise. Frased differently: the organization should have moved beyond the point of serious competition with other entities aspiring to the same objectives. This is, however, no easy feat. One does not attain prominency by just claiming it. I suggest that a big help to acquiring the necessary status is to have the work of the organization seriously evaluated by independent outside researchers. One pertinent claim of all well established organizations is that they really know a lot about actual victims' needs. The only way to validate that claim is to have researchers carry out studies to check on their satisfaction with the assistance provided to them by victim support schemes.

The second task to be undertaken by a well developed organization is to get fully integrated in a network with other agents within the criminal

justice system to work out victims policies. Substantive reform of the system - including effective implementation of victims' rights awarded in statutes enacted by the legislature - can only be achieved in cooperation with the police, the prosecution, the judiciary, representatives of the bar and public defenders, and the probation service. One needs to be regarded as a friend and ally rather than as a nuisance causing trouble. So there has to be a platform for deliberation between all these agents with the shared objective of accomplishing the emancipation of the victim in a responsible way. Needless to say is that the input by the victim support organization will carry a lot of weight in these networks. By the same token, in many countries it has proved to be effective to have special liaison officers for victims affairs within police forces and/or in prosecutors officers. What it all boils down to, is that there is an urgent need to change the attitude of all the traditional players in the criminal justice system. This is by no means easy to bring about. The work of victim support agencies can in this respect be alleviated by having some designated professional allies in the units involved. On the other hand a mature national organization for victim support should always retain full independence to criticize government policies on victims issues they disapprove of. This is one of the vital features of a really professional organization: having access to key policy makers and members of the legislature in order to exert influence when such is called for. Taking this argument one step further, any sensible government would not even consider changing law or policy in this area without automatically consulting the national victim support organization. And finally, in terms of cooperation with others towards common goals, I have to emphasize the importance of solid relationship with organizations specializing in providing assistance to specific categories of victims. Examples to be mentioned are MAD ('Mothers against drunken drivers') in the UK, associations supporting parents of murdered children in Belgium, the National council against racial discrimination in the Netherlands, and many others. These institutions are no competitors, but are to be considered as great resources of knowledge which can be put to use on a more general level.

In section 2 I mentioned as an essential precondition to set up a national victim assistance organization to attract the support of at least one powerful ally in politics or in government. In an advanced stage of development more is needed. Whenever a national organization is closely linked - or perceived to be closely linked - with only one part of the political spectrum, this will mean an intrinsic vulnerability. Once the party supporting your cause runs out of power, you might easily loose influence and (usually the first consequence) budget. So, in the long run it is imperative to broaden political support. This can be accomplished by any one of two mechanisms. One road would be to stress the elements of victim support which correspond most closely to the ideological tenets of the various parties represented in parliament (i.c. the element of solidarity and communitarianism with social democrats; the idea of 'good samaratism' by volunteers with christian democrats; and the idea of producing good results without state interference with the conservative parties). The other way would be to try to depoliticize victims issues altogether. Whenever possible, this course of action would be favoured by myself. The main point, however, is that the victims movement may not be identified in terms of party political distinctions. This would on the one hand lead to unacceptable financial vulnerabilities, and on the other to serve misconceptions in the public at large about the nature of victim support. Deflecting on the South African situation from these perspectives, two observations immediately come to mind. The first one is that "victim empowerment" is a very powerful label. In my view, it is a useful comprehensive concept connecting legal reform on the one hand and service providing efforts on the other. This constitutes a major improvement compared to the often dissociated activities of these kinds in other jurisdictions. The second observation is about the need to be patient. I wrote of an urgent need to change the attitude of all players in the criminal justice system. This is no easy feat. It will take a lot of time and perseverance to make progress in this respect. Experience elsewhere has demonstrated how difficult it is to really change traditional value systems and corresponding sets of priorities. One can only aspire to advance step by step - anticipating

occasional setbacks - a process that can easily take years and years before some of the more modest objectives have been visibly achieved. Patience, stamina and determination will be crucial in this long term battle to bring about fundamental change in the conventional criminal justice system.

The final question which must be addressed under the heading of external relations concerns funding. No matter how well developed an organization might be, there will always be a scarcity of financial resources. As a rule of thumb, this type of organization will almost without exception feel they are approximately 25% underfunded. There are three ways of dealing with this perennial problem. The first of these is to establish a section within the national office of the organization with the exclusive responsibility of fundraising in the private sector. The English and German organizations have proceeded along this line. A second model is to create a separate foundation with the same objective. The rationale behind this is the idea that it may be easier to raise money when the fundraiser does not appear to be benefitting itself from the success of its operations. This approach is adopted in The Netherlands. And finally, the financial situation of the victim support organization can really be boosted when they are designated as the main recipient of something like a fine surplus tax. In quite a few countries[3] a fixed percentage will be added to all fines in order to be used for victims issues. The amounts involved are so substantial that they could open up completely new areas of work when these funds were directly allocated to the victim support schemes.

3.2. Internal affairs

No matter how important the external relations are, the key to a successful process of professionalization is in the end to be found in the internal affairs of the organization. The first issue to be raised under this heading is the

[3] **Prominent examples are Belgium and Germany.**

question of discipline and accountability. In the early stages a network of victim support schemes will have to prove its right to existence by contacting a good number of victims every year. But once the organization is firmly established in the community, the attention will have to shift away from quantitative measures and more and more into the direction of improved quality standards. Improving the quality of services rendered means, among other things, standardizing the format of the work. Each scheme within the organization will have to accept standards agreed upon by the membership. These standards will for a large part be based on the principle of best practice. Part of this will also involve administrative discipline. Standard procedures for documenting each contact with a victim will have to be in place and strictly adhered to. In an organization of a reasonable size, computerization is inevitable to process the huge amount of data. The national office should provide standardized soft-ware to all local schemes in order to facilitate information management on a central level. All of this is particularly relevant in terms of accountability. A well established and publicly funded enterprise will have to be able to demonstrate that the taxpayers money is well spend. Political support can in the long run only be sustained if the organization can show an impressive track record. This requires administrative skills and a permanent attitude of not taking the quality of your work for granted. Managing this process and at the same time maintaining stability within the organization is one of the ultimate tests of its maturety and sense of direction. On a slightly different level, I feel that the public relations affairs of a national victim support organization will in an advanced stage of development have to acquire a professional approach which was not called for before. In the initial years of existence, free publicity was easy to get and the message was pretty easy to get across. Victims were the forgotten party and amends must be made. By now, the people - and most certainly the representatives of the media - know all about that. So one won't get access to repeat that point over and over again. The major task for the PR-section of an advanced victim support organization now has changed dramatically. In my opinion, one of its main objectives at present times is to

increase name recognition for the organization and its activities. The main business is no longer about the plight of some extremely victimized people, but it centres around basically marketing the value of the daily routines of victim support schemes. The PR-job has transformed from the dramatical incidents to the ordinary facts of life. Divulging to the public at large how much savings can be achieved by expediting the coping process. The transition from publicity about extremely traumatic events toward dissemination of consequences of day-to-day events marks a turning point in the PR-strategy of victim support organizations.

The professionalization of a national victim support organization also involves a shift in the relations obtaining between the various levels of operation. In its stages of infancy, the few - often charismatic - leaders at the top, in the national office, will have the knowledge and experience which will be transferred on to the local schemes. But as time passes, this arrangement will change drastically. Over the years, the local victim support schemes will themselves gain a tremendous amount of first hand experience on the job. This will have a major impact in their relations with the national office. While it may have started as a sort of mentor-pupil kind of thing, as time goes on it will develop into a more equal partnership. As far as generating ideas and policymaking is concerned, this will increasingly lead to a bottom up approach instead of a top down model. The main point is that a professionalised organization will have to take its individual members very seriously. The national office will have to be completely candid and frank with them and consult with them on a regular basis in early stages of decision making processes. Professionalization of the organization could quite often also lead to restructuring of the top management. This quite often involves, inter alia, the board of overseers (or 'The Committee' as it is called in some jurisdictions). Usually in the early stages of development there is quite an intensive contact between the board and the director of the national office. Deliberations include all kinds of operational and tactical questions. In a more advanced stage of professionalization the board is supposed to function in a different way. Instead of supervising daily activities, it should restrict

itself to strategic questions and major policy decisions.

The third aspect of the maturing process is of a somewhat awkward nature. I am pointing to the risk of an unfriendly take over. As the saying goes: 'success has many fathers, while failure is an orphan'. Experience has shown that some of the most successful victim support organisations - particularly the ones with the proven ability to create a sound financial basis - have been confronted with attempts to take the business over. This will always happen in a very subtle way and it will invariably be presented as an effort in the best interests of victims of crime. Usually, however, less altruistic motives underlay such aspirations. It may be a part of the government or a segment of the semi-public domain which is itself threatened by budget cuts and frantically looking for 'new markets'. In some countries, for instance, the general social services have positioned themselves as perfect candidates for an umbrella organization in which the victim support system would well fit in as a section.[4] Moves like that are usually pretty obvious, and transparent enough to fend off relatively easy. A phenomenon which is more difficult to detect and to protect yourself against is what insiders call 'the enemy from within'. This means that someone who is connected to the organization or even has responsibilities in the fringes of the organization, tries to take over for all the wrong reasons, like personal glorification. A mature organization should always keep an eye open in order to prevent this to occur, because it is exactly this type of development which could lead to a rapid deprofessionalization of its structure.

The fourth and final factor contributing to the professionalization of victim support agencies has to do with 'human resource management' (HRM). A ground rule for a national organization of this kind is that there should be uniform contracts for paid coordinators in the local schemes. Differentiations in the level of pay cause a lot of tension and undermine the coherence of the organisation. Special care has to be paid to the position of

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[4] **Again, Belgium can be referred to as a prime example.**

volunteers. The two main risks in this area are burnout and an unacceptable high turnover. Burnout can be prevented by solid systems of supervision (including extensive debriefing) and intervision. It can also be limited by regularly organizing special events where appreciation for the work done by the volunteers can be vented. In the UK, for instance, there is an annual national conference lasting for several days where hundreds of volunteers gather. It is an excellent occasion to raise their spirits and reinforce their feeling that it has all been worthwhile. The Dutch equivalent of this is the annual volunteers-day, where presentations by prominent speakers are given and there is also time for informal exchanges. These types of team building activities are intended to keep the individual volunteer visitors motivation intact. In this sense they not only aim to limit instances of burnout but in the perspective of the national organization they also contribute to keep the turnover within reasonable restrictions. In the Netherlands we had some consecutive years with a 25% turnover. No sizeable organization can sustain such a high rate for a long period of time. If one only considers the cost involved in selecting and training so many new volunteers each year (even provided they can be found at all!), it will be obvious that this must be a focal and permanent issue in the management of victim support schemes.

4. Concluding remarks

The preceding sections contain a series of elements which play a considerable role in the various stages of development of a national victim support organization. In a way, the description and analysis of all the issues involved lead to the impression that there could be some standard model of progressing from one stage to the next. In order to avoid misconceptions, however, one hitherto hidden dimension must be added. I am alluding to the cultural peculiarities and historical background of the various countries. I have drawn examples from regions within Europe which are difficult to compare. National differentiations of these kinds account for the fact that what works in one jurisdiction is not necessarily equally suitable for another.

For this reason, the observations in the preceding sections should not be interpreted as guidelines for uniform action leading to success no matter what the cultural environment. European examples - even examples of what is considered to be "best practice" - quite often will not fill South African circumstances. Having said that, there are at least four conditions which are of universal relevance. The first one of these is the concept of networking. No victim support organization will ever be successful in the long run unless it is able to secure firm connections with the other major players in the criminal justice system. The organization will have to become part of the so-called establishment, fully accepted by the traditional operatives in the field. Secondly, regardless of national circumstances the selection and training of volunteers visitors (or their functional equivalents) will have to conform to high standards. All people actually assisting victims on a day to day basis need the unqualified competence to face up to the high demands of this crucially sensitive job. There can be no doubt about it that in this area of work poor performance is even worse than doing nothing at all. Considering the human interests at stake, there is no room for error here. The third point that transcends cultural or national discrepancies is about the people constituting the major working force of the organizations. The present exposition is mainly focused on the process of professionalising national victim support organisations. The point that should be stressed here is that the notion of volunteerism is completely compatible with raising the professional standards of victim support. As explained earlier, the services of ordinary fellow citizens - not just earning a living by doing so - are intrinsically suitable to meet the needs of crime victims. Which leads me to the fourth and final point. Service providing organizations must always be very much aware of the need to really make good on their promise of pretending to know more about actual victims' needs than any other organization involved in the administration of criminal justice.

In conclusion, I would warn any victim support organization, no matter its stage of development, to take its own permanent existence for granted. Victims issues could still end up being a temporary fashion of the

day: a genuine concern for one generation to be superseded by another preoccupation of the next. A case in point to underline this possibility is the relationship between victim support on the one hand and the crime prevention movement on the other. While every victims advocate is by nature also in favour of crime prevention policies, it would definitely not be advisable - as some seem to suggest - to view victim support primarily as a means of promoting the cause of prevention. If that perspective were to be accepted, the victims movement would be instrumentalized to an irresponsible extend, because it could easily be traded in whenever a more effective tool to that effect would be discovered. In the South African context this connection should be watched closely, in order to assure that the advantages of the ties between the Victim Empowerment Program and the National Crime Prevention Strategy continue to outweigh its potential drawbacks.

And finally, let us reflect one more time on the concept of professionalising victim services. Professionalization means planning and control, it alludes to competent performance, it is about accountability, it implies effective use of financial resources. But when all is said and done, victim support still has some essential features distinguishing it from all kinds of other operations. So let us never confuse a professional approach to victim assistance with managing an industrial plant. Professionalization of victim support schemes will always have to take the human factor into account and place it above anything else. Victims are no product to be processed. They are human beings, fellow citizens, who have just gone through an ordeal. Professionalization then primarily means to assure they get the best possible care they deserve. When push comes to shove, professionalization is tantamount to upgrading the quality of services rendered to them.